

Soviets hold to hard line in Third World

By CORD MEYER

GENERAL Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev knows how to speak softly about the need for nuclear disarmament and has improved the Soviet image in the West with a more civilized tone of voice.

But where Soviet power and prestige are at stake in the Third World, Gorbachev has proved that he carries a very big stick and is prepared to use it.

From Afghanistan to South Yemen, from Angola to Ethiopia, from Cuba to Nicaragua, the new Soviet leader has demonstrated his determination to consolidate every geopolitical advance made by his predecessors and to tolerate no backsliding from one-party Marxist regimes where they have been established.

The announced "Reagan Doctrine" of providing support to anti-Communist guerrillas and freedom fighters in nations temporarily under Marxist rule now confronts a hard reality. The Kremlin is prepared to raise the ante and

to provide huge additional supplies of modern armament and expert military advice to beleaguered Communist regimes in the underdeveloped world.

On the basis of a case-by-case analysis, Reagan officials have reluctantly come to the conclusion that since the Geneva summit, there is no evidence that the Soviet general secretary has backed away from any of the regional confrontations about which the American president warned him.

In Afghanistan, the ambiguous Soviet hints at Geneva about a willingness to compromise have proved totally misleading.

A steady improvement in Soviet armaments and tactics endangers the Afghan resistance, while Soviet bombing across the border makes the Pakistani government even less willing to allow the delivery of effective anti-aircraft weaponry to the guerrillas.

The strategic rewards of victory and the fear of the consequences of withdrawal have apparently persuaded Gorbachev to escalate a war that he did not start.

In the recent bloody infighting between Communists in South Yemen that left more than 10,000 dead in the ruins of Aden, the Kremlin hesitated only momentarily before intervening effectively on the side of the hard-line Marxist rebels by providing them with critical intelligence and technical support to the air force.

Gorbachev was prepared to take no chances with a Communist regime that he judged to be less than totally reliable.

In Angola, a similar hardening of the Soviet line and escalation of military force was described by Dr. Jonas Savimbi during his visit to Washington to obtain U.S. support for his UNITA guerrillas.

In Ethiopia, the Soviets have continued to supply the Marxist regime of chairman Mengistu with the arms necessary to contain the tribal revolts, while the West tries to feed the starving millions who have fled the drought and the enforced relocation and collectivization.

Through the Ethiopian regime, the Soviets also are sending arms to support Col. John Garang's rebellion in the southern Sudan in order to destabilize the shaky military government in Khartoum.

Since Gorbachev took over the reins in Moscow, the Soviets in Nicaragua have sharply escalated the quality and quantity of their military assistance to the Sandinista regime.

In the face of this Gorbachev offensive that depends so heavily on raw military force, Reagan is faced with serious dilemmas in trying to give the freedom fighters the weapons they desperately need to have a chance of dislodging the radical dicta-

torships they oppose.

In agreeing to help freedom fighters in Angola and Nicaragua, the neighboring countries through which U.S. assistance would have to pass to reach the guerrillas cannot permit the openly acknowledged delivery of American military aid across their borders.

The governments of Zaire and Honduras both would insist upon the protection of deniability and will require that any American arms be shipped secretly.

Since the chairmen of both the Senate and House intelligence committees publicly have stated their opposition to covert military funding, the President faces big problems on Capitol Hill if he attempts to channel arms secretly to Savimbi's guerrillas and to the contras in Nicaragua.

The Reagan Doctrine is in deep trouble, and only the man who announced it can save it with a strong personal campaign for bipartisan support.